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Open to Reason: Muslim Philosophers in Conversation with the Western Tradition

Souleymane Bachir Diagne

New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 120 pages. Hardback. ISBN 978-0231185462.

Open to Reason: Muslim Philosophers in Conversation with the Western Tradition is an English translation of Souleymane Bachir Diagne's short but exceedingly rich *Comment philosopher en Islam?*, first published in 2008. Diagne's aim is to draw attention to the philosophical spirit that has been present in Islam from its inception and, to this end, he offers a potted history of Islamic philosophy, or at least of some of Islam's interactions with Western philosophy. The book consists of ten chapters, each of which focuses on philosophers from either the classical period (9th – 12th centuries) or the modern (19th – 20th centuries), and a brief conclusion.

Chapter 1 ("And how to not philosophize?") offers a brief history of the Qur'an and an account of how Islamic philosophizing arose as a result of the disputes between the Shi'a and Sunni communities over who should be considered the prophet Muhammad's rightful successor as "commander of the faithful" (3). Both sides believed the answer could be reached through fidelity to Muhammad and to his message in the Qur'an, but as Diagne notes, "when the meaning of fidelity itself proves to be a matter of speculation, how not to philosophize?" (4). Other philosophical questions that soon emerged concerned predestination, free will, how to understand the Qur'an itself, and in particular, how best to understand God, especially in light of some of the more anthropomorphic descriptions found in the text. Conversely, literalists opposed the use of reason and philosophy, fearing that those who overuse reason become unbelievers. Diagne's own sympathies become clear early on as he stresses that philosophizing is inevitable, "because the revelation speaks to those who are human and think, there is never a zero degree of interpretation, and literalism is merely *one* reading, though it pretends not to be" (10, cf. 64).

Chapter 2 ("How a language becomes philosophical") concerns the early engagement with the philosophy of Aristotle, along with the resulting efforts to make Arabic a philosophical language and the resistance such efforts encountered from linguistic purists such as Sirāfī (c. 893-979), who believed in preserving "the correct and usual modes of speaking" (21) against the imposition of neologisms and foreign syntax. In chapter 3 ("What does it mean for a philosophy to be Islamic?"), Diagne explains that in relation to events such as the transport and ascent of Muhammad, the task of the philosopher was "to interpret, according to reason and its concepts, that which appears to be a story addressed to the imagination" (25), which is then illustrated by Avicenna's (980-1037 CE) NeoPlatonic account of the ascent of Muhammad. Chapter 4 ("Against philosophy") charts al-Ghazālī's (1058-1111 CE) attempts to determine where one might find certainty, which led him to reject the senses and reason, instead advocating mysticism as the true path of illumination. Chapter 5 ("A lesson in ecological philosophy") focuses on Ibn Tufayl's (c. 1105-1185 CE) philosophical novel *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, in which the protagonist grows up alone on a desert island and, using only his inborn resources of reason, manages to attain knowledge of God and the proper way to orientate himself towards both God and his creation. Chapter 6 ("The obligation to philosophize") is the last one to concern the classical period; it focuses on Averroes (1126-1198 CE) and his belief that the harmony between religion and philosophy meant that there could be no conflict between the truths of one and the truths of the other, as well as his argument that the study of philosophy is a religious duty, at least for those possessing the right disposition for philosophy.

The remaining four chapters concern modern voices. Chapter 7 ("The need for philosophy") outlines al-Afghānī's (c. 1838-1897) attempts to reinvigorate the philosophical spirit in Islam, while chapter 8 ("The philosophy of reform") introduces us to a number of

reformist thinkers, such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), who urged Muslims to escape the rigidity of thinking about time by engaging in reasoning that responds to the demands of the present; and Sayyid Ameer Ali (1849-1928), who argued that the common practice of polygamy was undermined by (and hence inconsistent with) the Qur'an. Chapter 9 ("The philosophy of movement") concerns Muhammad Iqbal's (1877-1938) understanding of time, and his reading of the Qur'an as offering a cosmology of continual emergence. Finally, in chapter 10 ("Pluralism"), which at just three-and-a-half pages is the shortest in the book, Diagne first returns to al-Ghazālī, noting that in spite of his claimed anti-philosophism he nevertheless condemned fanaticism and the exclusivist thinking of different sects, before offering a brief outline of the pluralist thinking of Tierno Bokar (1875-1939).

At just over 100 pages the book covers a lot of ground in a relatively short space, enabling the reader to get just a brief taste of the ideas of each of the thinkers discussed. That, coupled with the fact that nothing is said about the ideas of other key Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Bājjā (1095-1138 CE) and Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 CE), would make it difficult to recommend this book as a first introduction to Islamic philosophy. However, it should be noted that it was not Diagne's aim to produce such a book. Instead, he sees *Open to Reason* as a corrective to the Eurocentric understanding of the history of philosophy, which views philosophy as a uniquely Western phenomenon, born in Greece, then transmitted to Rome, then to (Christian) Europe, where it exclusively remained. As Diagne correctly notes, this is "a misleading simplification" since "there is no such thing as a unique European philosophical telos, and textbooks on the history of philosophy should reflect the fact that philosophical thought is found in every human culture" (103-04). It is to those who are unaware of the philosophy in the Islamic culture that Diagne addresses this book, which succeeds admirably in showing that Islam has a long tradition both of philosophizing and of positive engagement with other traditions.

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